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22 June 1961

MEMORANDUM FOR: Assistant Director, Central Reference

FROM : Chief, Document Division

SUBJECT : Intelligence Subject Code (ISC)

REFERENCE : CODIB-D-36/2, dated 12 June 1961; Subject: Revision Procedures for the Intelligence Subject Code.

1. The Intelligence Subject Code was revised in February 1960 and published under the auspices of the USIB Committee on Documentation (CODIB). Since then there have been criticisms primarily because of the development of mechanized systems for handling intelligence information. This is an attempt to review and clarify the philosophy underlying the common use of the ISC within the intelligence community.

2. Traditionally, libraries have used subject classification systems, either decimal or alphabetical in structure, to help direct researchers to the literature on a given subject available in the library. Many classification systems are in use: some, like the Dewey Decimal scheme are general, and others are highly specialized to conform with the narrow limits of a particular discipline. Each scheme has as its objective to communicate to the user the intrinsic nature of subjects and their relationships through the medium of logically arranged terminology. The catalog which results from the use of a subject classification system serves as a focal point from which the researcher may proceed to pertinent source materials. No catalog has yet been devised which automatically gives a researcher the specific answer to his problem. The catalog, no matter how intricately arranged, is only part of a larger communication system which ultimately requires personal examination of a mass of material.

3. Conventional libraries have found that savings occur when it is possible to achieve cooperative cataloging of books. The reasons are self-evident. If all agree to adopt the same subject classification scheme and cataloging techniques, i.e., if all "speak the same language", then each book receives analytical treatment only once, basic catalog cards are printed only once, and all participants in the cooperative system reap the resultant benefits. The best illustration of such cooperation is the cataloging and card distribution system of the Library of Congress which today serves thousands of libraries in the U.S. and abroad.

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4. There is no question that the cooperative treatment for indexing intelligence reports would be equally beneficial to the USIB agencies. The acceptance by CIA of the Air Force coding product as input into the CIA Intellofax System is definitely conserving manpower.

5. The Intelligence Subject Code (ISC) was initially developed by the Central Intelligence Agency and was adopted in 1948 for use with a punched card system. In 1955 the Hoover Commission Task Force on Intelligence Activities recommended that "all departments within the Defense Establishment and the Department of State adopt a single indexing system based on the Intelligence Subject Code." Soon thereafter the ISC was adopted by the intelligence community for use by member organizations. The present revision, prepared under the auspices of the United States Intelligence Board's Committee on Documentation, is an attempt to meet the requirements of the intelligence community and to reflect changes considered necessary after ten years of application. Included for use with the ISC is a new Area Classification Code, also the result of this community's co-operative undertaking.

6. Over the years it has been necessary to modify the detailed requests of specialists for subject expansion to conform with the principle of practical and easily understandable classification. The ISC was established originally and has always been considered as an overall guide and not as a classification system for specialized subjects; but it has always been recognized that the code must be adjusted to the realities of the reports issuing from the field and that there is no universal system.

7. The ISC is designed to provide subject and area references to the information contained in intelligence reports as required by a general intelligence library reference service. Specialized terminology and technical detail have been kept to a minimum. Cross references, explanatory notes, and definitions are included to aid in the uniform application of the ISC. Although the ISC is an index of medium depth, greater specificity can be obtained by: (a) extending the numbering system beyond the sixth digit; (b) augmenting specific portions of the basic ISC; or (c) by adding key words in clear text. The ISC must be applied in a specific manner because intelligence reporting and retrieval requests are usually specific in nature. For example, a document dealing with various types of naval vessels should not be indexed under the general heading naval vessels; rather, it should be indexed under the specific type of vessels. General headings should be used only for general reporting. The ISC is a classified index; naval vessels are therefore all listed in the same section; a generic search for everything on naval vessels is thereby easily accomplished. The ISC is designed for and has been applied to both manual and machine systems.

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8. The six digit notation scheme used in the ISC is a modified hierarchical arrangement with the first digit identifying the chapter; the second and third in combination indicating the major subject classes within each chapter; and the last three the subject subdivisions within each class. In order to allow room for interpolation of new subjects, gaps have been left throughout the notation scheme. The hierarchical arrangement could not always be maintained in the last three digit positions because the subject density would not permit. Therefore, many of the class subdivisions are numbered consecutively with appropriate gaps rather than hierarchically.

9. The Subject Modifiers contained in the ISC are a faceting device which can be combined with certain subjects to specify actions or conditions which affect those subjects. They are comparable to subject subdivisions as applied in some classified indexes or to auxiliary tables and various faceting devices found in other classification schemes.


10. After 12 years of use, CIA is convinced that ISC application, although important, is only one phase of a total information cycle involving a reference service and its customers. Other phases which are equally vital toward the achievement of the overall efficiency in a general library system include: document storage and access, programming of requests, and the qualities of aggressiveness and knowledgeability among the reference librarians who are in direct contact with the customer. The history of ISC use in CIA points up the fact that this Agency's library system, unlike its specialized Registers, does not automatically consolidate information. The CIA Library, like any of its conventional counterparts, is incapable of immediately providing the answer to a customer's question but can supply him with a body of citations which he himself must examine and accept or reject. The number of citations presented to the customer for review is not necessarily a function of the precision of code construction but can be refined by permitting the reference librarians, in collaboration with the customer, to make the first selective reduction of citations.

11. We have received criticisms of the composition, form and application of the ISC and have been told it needs radical revision. The criticisms emanate we understand from contractor personnel who are trying to sell their individual systems to USIB agencies. Obviously the ISC can't be radically revised to conform to the varying requirements of several different systems designed to provide different ways of retrieving document references or information. We do believe however that the ISC can be used in different systems if those systems are properly designed.

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The ISC is a classification tool for retrieving references (abstracts) to intelligence information reports and can be used as a major building block in a system designed for information retrieval. If the document system in question is aimed to perform this service, the ISC can be a useful tool. If the document system in question is designed for some other purpose such as to flash a red flag when the number of armored divisions reaches a certain level in a certain area, then a classification scheme other than or supplemental to the ISC would probably be needed.

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